

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 18, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As Members of Congress who support a strong U.S.-Israel relationship and a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we write to urge you to engage with the Israeli government to prevent the displacement of 38 families (approximately 300 people) and the demolition of their homes in the Palestinian village of al-Walaja in East Jerusalem. The destruction and displacement of this community would run counter to the values shared by the U.S. and Israel, while further undermining long-term Israeli security, Palestinian dignity, and prospects for peace.

Al-Walaja is a Palestinian agricultural village that lies less than a mile south of residential West Jerusalem and northwest of Bethlehem. It has existed since the Ottoman period with some residents able to trace their ancestors to the village in the 1600s. In 1949, as part of the armistice agreement between Israel and Jordan, al-Walaja residents who had resided in what became Israel were compelled to relocate to the Jordanian side of the Green Line.¹ Israel captured this land in the 1967 war and, after occupying the West Bank, annexed roughly one-third of al-Walaja to Jerusalem's municipal boundaries.² The Jerusalem Municipality has yet to approve master plans and provide local government services to the part of al-Walaja annexed to its territory.³ This prevents residents from legally building new homes.

It is our understanding that over the last 54 years, residents in this part of the village have built dozens of homes without permits out of necessity.⁴ It is also our understanding that

¹ See B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, *The village of al-Walajah: Dispossession and Home Demolitions*, Feb. 17, 2022, https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/dispossession_and_home_demolitions_in_al_walajah

² *Id.*

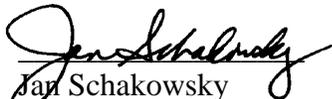
³ *Id.* See also Oliver Holmes & Pablo Gutiérrez, *Seven decades of struggle: how one Palestinian village's story captures pain of 'Nakba'*, The Guardian, May 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/13/al-walaja-palestinian-village-being-squeezed-off-the-map>

⁴ See Nir Hasson, *Jerusalem Planning Board Decision Paves Way for Home Demolitions in Palestinian Village*, Haaretz, Feb. 7, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-jerusalem-board-decision-paves-way-for-home-demolitions-in-palestinian-village-1.9511921?v=1646178573437>

residents have done everything they can to overcome the lack of a master plan – even submitting their own 15 years ago with the assistance of an architect and a nongovernmental organization with expertise in planning.⁵ This plan was rejected in January 2021 by the Jerusalem Local Planning and Building Committee, claiming the village lands hold “great scenic and environmental value, with a contiguity of open areas and ancient, extraordinary agrarian cultural values.”⁶ We view this reasoning as unjust and contradictory given that al-Walaja residents are responsible for creating and cultivating the “scenic” and “agrarian” values of the land through their unique use of terrace farming.⁷ Al-Walaja residents have appealed this decision and the Supreme Court is set to hear the case on March 30, 2022. There have already been a number of demolitions in al-Walaja in recent years in areas not protected by court injunction. If residents lose their appeal, there is a very real and proximate prospect that they may lose their homes, their community, and their way of life.

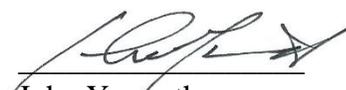
The U.S. has historically played a constructive role in facilitating dialogue and reconciliation in the region, and we urge the Administration to continue that work. That is why we request that you work with the Israeli government to immediately halt demolitions in al-Walaja and ensure that the planning authorities are working with the Palestinian residents to advance an equitable development plan that will formally authorize existing homes, provide for adequate municipal services, and allow for residential and other necessary development of the village. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

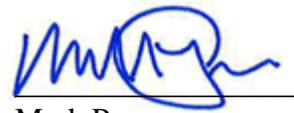
Sincerely,


Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress


David E. Price
Member of Congress


Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress


John Yarmuth
Member of Congress


Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

⁵ *Id.* See also Gershom Gorenberg, *Opinion: Mr. Blinken, you can pick up the phone and save a Palestinian village from destruction*, Wash. Post, Dec. 21, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/21/mr-blinken-you-can-pick-up-phone-save-palestinian-village-destruction/>

⁶ See B’Tselem *supra* note 1.

⁷ *Id.*

Co-Signers:

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